

## **I Heard The Bells On Christmas Day**

By Maggie Moller

*“Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom*

*His favor rests.’”*

(Luke 2:13-14)

*“For to us a Child is born, to us a Son is given, and the government will be on His shoulders. And He will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

*Of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over His kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.”*

(Isaiah 9:6-7)

As we approach the Christmas season, I thought it would be perfect to reflect on a Christmas hymn for my article this month. As I looked through the hymnal, I was drawn to my dad’s favorite: “I Heard The Bells On Christmas Day.”

The Lyricist: Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was born in Portland, Maine, on February 27, 1807. He was the second eldest of eight children. He started school at the age of three, and by the time he was fifteen, he was enrolled in Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine, alongside his older brother, Stephen. On September 14, 1831, he married his childhood friend, Mary Storer Potter. Sadly, Mary passed away on November 29, 1835, after a long illness. Henry was deeply saddened by her death and devoted himself to his work as a professor at Harvard. Henry was later remarried to Frances (Fanny) Appleton after a seven-year-long courtship. He and Fanny had six children together. Henry suffered the loss of Fanny after she was severely burned when her dress caught fire. Once again, Henry was forced to bear the deep sorrow caused by the death of his wife. At the same time Henry was mourning Fanny’s death, his eldest son, Charles, joined the Union army against his father’s wishes. Charles was severely wounded in the Battle of New Hope Church. It was then, on Christmas Day, that Henry was inspired to write his poem entitled, “Christmas Bells,” which would become the lyrics for “I Heard The Bells On Christmas Day.”

On March 24, 1882, Henry died after suffering from severe stomach pains. He would later be recognized as one of the best-known poets of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The Composer: John Baptiste Calkin

John Baptiste Calkin was born on March 16, 1827, in London, England. He received his musical training from his father who was a pianist, cellist, and composer. He served as an organist and choirmaster at a variety of churches and was also a professor at Guildhall School of Music and later at the Croydon Conservatory. He composed the music for “I Heard The Bells On Christmas Day” in 1872. Throughout his life, he composed a variety of church music, hymns, and anthems. He passed away on May 15, 1905, in London, England.

As I reflected on the theme of “Peace” for this month’s newsletter, I thought about what was

happening in America at the time this hymn was written. America was in the midst of a civil war: brothers were fighting against brothers. The thought of peace seemed a distant memory for most during this tragic time in our nation's history. Yet, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow chose to write a poem around the theme, "Peace on earth, good will to men." How could he write such words when there was so much suffering and unrest in our country? He explains this in the fourth and fifth verses of his hymn, which say,

*And in despair I bowed my head  
There is no peace on earth, I said,  
For hate is strong and mocks the song  
Of peace on earth, good will to men.*

*Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:  
God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;  
The wrong shall fail, the right prevail  
With peace on earth, good will to men.*

The key message comes in verse 5 when Henry writes, "God is not dead, nor doth He sleep." We can have peace, even when the world is in turmoil, because our God reigns! He is the Prince of Peace! This is good news that should cause us to rejoice! We are facing a similar situation today to what Longfellow was experiencing during the Civil War. While America might not be in outright civil war with guns and cannons, we are definitely facing division within our nation.

And while it may be tempting to get discouraged as we see the direction our country is heading, we must remember to follow the words spoken in Hebrews 12:2: "*Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.*" Paul also tells us in his letter to the Philippians, "*Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus*" (Philippians 4:6-7). I hope that in this Christmas season you may be filled with the peace of God as you celebrate our Savior's birth!